
PAINTING SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP: GIUSEPPE CASTIGLIONE AND THREE EMPERORS OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamic of spiritual friendship between the Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione and three emperors: Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, who reigned in China between 1662 and 1796. Paintings, historical reference and the poetic calligraphy which the emperor added with his own brush to Castiglione's paintings, corroborate the notion of a deep friendship, one that is spiritual, in the way that spiritual friendship is defined and described by the 11th century Cistercian, Aelred of Rievaulx. The role of perspective, in both its technical and its spiritual connotations, is examined in terms of classical Chinese and western European traditions in relation to the deeper interior seeing of a spiritual friend. It is argued that Castiglione came to know the heart and mind of the emperor with such empathy that he is able to paint from that shared interiority, sharing affection, joy and even sorrow, beyond words, to suffuse spiritual experience within the work of painting, brush to silk, and for the gaze of the viewer.

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In September 2018 the *Global Times* ran an article entitled, “Giuseppe Castiglione: role model for modern diplomacy”. It began by explaining that while his name is hardly known in the west, in China he is well known as Lan Shi’ning, meaning Generations of Peace and Tranquillity or Peace of the World, a name held in highest esteem. Castiglione’s work and his contribution to the cultural history of China “invoke the greatest dignity and respect among the people of China,” as a man who navigated seas of turmoil and unrest, built bridges of understanding, rising above internal church politics and the short-sightedness of high level decision-makers who had never experienced life in China. With his brush, he built relationships, dialogue and above all, beauty: the beauty of Peace in the court of three consecutive emperors, Kangxi (r.1662-1722), Yongzheng (r.1723-1736) and Qianlong (r.1736-1796).

While it is often suggested that Castiglione was forced to paint, as if against his will, within the walls of the Forbidden City, I am inclined to believe that Castiglione, a Jesuit, did not act against his conscience. I agree with Francisco Vossilla who details the depth of Castiglione’s commitment to his faith (Andreini and Vossilla, pp. 101-122), which gave him the courage to weather the stormy upheavals of the Rites controversy and remain, with seven of his Jesuit brethren, at work in the imperial art studios. His pieces were embellished with poetic commentary, calligraphed by the Qianlong emperor himself. It is likely that this man of great peace grew in closeness and friendship with each of the emperors. Indeed, at the request of the Qianlong emperor, Castiglione was honoured with gifts upon his death including an imperial funeral in Beijing.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

What is spiritual friendship? Going back to the 11th Century Cistercian monk, Aelred of

Rievaulx, we find this description: A spiritual friend is one with whom you share your soul and you are likely to have one, perhaps two in a lifetime (Rievaulx, 1163/2010). Today it has developed into the practice we call spiritual direction. In the Ignatian tradition, the spirituality of the Jesuits—of which Castiglione was a member—this involves sharing the spiritual experience of engagement of the senses, to imagine a scene where the observer becomes a part of the ongoing narrative, often entering into the characters’ various perspectives.



Landscape. Giuseppe Castiglione
Wikimedia Commons

Engagement of the senses integrates the lived experience of the world around us with a larger understanding of goodness - God - in the world. “My friend must be the guardian of our mutual love, or even of my very soul, so that he will preserve in faithful silence all its secrets, and whatever he sees in it that is flawed he will correct or endure with all his strength. When I rejoice, he will rejoice; when I grieve, he will grieve with me.” (Rievaulx, p. 32)

In his early years of working within the palace walls, Castiglione apparently is

already striving to send a spiritual message to the Emperor. In 1723, just a year after arriving in Beijing, he paints *Gathering of Auspicious Signs*, richly detailed in spiritual symbolism well understood by the Chinese eye, and not unlike the *vanitas* and garland symbolism which had taken over European painting in the same era. Castiglione studied in the circle of Jesuit artists

three emperors, which may be characterised as a kind of spiritual friendship.

Castiglione's portraiture captures an intuitive understanding of not only what is pleasing to his friends, but also his subject, from the perspective of interior knowledge and a growing visual wisdom. Castiglione was just twenty-seven years old when he arrived in



One Hundred Horses. Giuseppe Castiglione National Palace Museum, Taipei.

which included Daniel Seghers (1590-1661) and Andrea Pozzo (1642-1709) who frequently used floral imagery to go beyond words with the poignant message of the brevity of life (Po-chia Hsia, p. 154; Wittkower and Jaffe, p. 8; Fagioli in Alessandro and Vossilla, pp. 133-136). "It is the mark of a virtuous mind always to meditate upon lofty and difficult things, so that it either attains or more clearly understands and recognises that

China. The first emperor under whom he served, Kangxi, was already 43. A somber scholar, austere in comparison to his successors, Kangxi was interested in amassing knowledge, translating literary works and seeing connections between diverse fields of learning. Each of these would have resonated well with the principles of Jesuit pedagogy outlined in the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), the seminal compendium for Jesuit education. This compendium would have shaped Castiglione's own orientation, while studying in Genova and Coimbra, before voyaging eastward to China. Thus prepared, Castiglione, could well find common ground, shared perspective with the goals and desires of the Kangxi emperor. Though he was perhaps not ready to be a spiritual guide, he could well become in the eyes of the emperor a favored and promising companion, and a teacher to the other painters of the court. His spiritual wisdom would grow with time, and through the tribulation of the era in which he lived.

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which it desires" (Rievaulx p.60).

Indeed Aelred of Rievaulx is writing about a friendship infused with the love of God, or what we more generally call the divine, and in the minds the emperors of China, there was of course the conviction that he himself was divine. This matter of identity—of an "I and thou"—was certainly pertinent to Castiglione's relationship with the

DEPTH PERSPECTIVE AND THE ROLE OF THE SCROLL

A good spiritual director, a spiritual friend, needs two things: depth and perspective, in order to be able to see and to share vision with the eyes of the person she accompanies. Castiglione had to learn to see with new eyes, without losing sight of God. He gave lasting depth and perspective to

China's interactions with the West, growing out of personal encounter through shared seeing.

Perspective differs greatly between east and west. In the west, perspective depends upon a vanishing point in a single scene one place at one point in time, whereas in the Chinese tradition, there are multiple perspectives, many ways of looking at a scene depending on where one is

territory represented and understood in this way, in other words, to have his perspective received and understood by Castiglione, as the way the emperor sees the world (Crossley, 1999). The emperor has at least visual command over his observable territory, at least in imagination—like an ongoing piece of theater, a living text, something almost biblical. In western linear



Portraits of the Qianlong Emperor and His Twelve Consorts | 1736 - c. 1770s Giuseppe Castiglione and others | Cleveland Museum of Art.

placed. The sequence of events in human time plays a lesser roll. Several events can be taking place, as one glances and moves through a scroll, revealing scenes or situations in every day life.

In classical Chinese painting there are at least three perspectives, all potentially present in any composition: foreground, middle ground

perspective, what is beyond the vanishing point is beyond what the picture invites us to imagine. Linear perspective also encompasses a geometric understanding of scale, but Castiglione was able to free himself of these limitations. In fact his experience of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the core of Ignatian spirituality, where one creates

Perhaps no painting is more affirmative of the spiritual reflection that Castiglione inspired, particularly in the Qianlong emperor, than his double portraits, *One or Two?*

and far distance, as we learn from the 11th century writing of Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lin quan gas zhi* /Lofty Ambitions in Forests and Streams. (ca. 1050/1957). Looking from the bottom of a mountain to the top is *gaoyuan*; from front mountain to back mountain is “deep distance,” *shenyuan*, and from nearby mountains to the distant mountains is *pingyuan*. It would have been important for the emperor to have his

a composition of place, and then shifts in and out from the vantage point of various characters in the story, prepared him well for the kind of moving perspective that explores space from shifting vantage points, as in Chinese painting, in this instance with the eyes of the emperor himself. In a Chinese scroll, there are many scenes taking place at the same time. Handling a scroll we limit our vision to one part, one act, in scenes from

daily life, and then we move, scroll, to a new focal point, a new situation or perspective. The scroll becomes more like God's view over the world, with joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, births



Fragrant Concubine

From Sotheby's Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art. September, 2014

and deaths, all within God's view and the painter serves as co-creator, revealing the divine to the observer, the spirit within the subject, which is in turn the object of divine creation. "God himself is at work pouring forth such great friendship and love between himself and his creation" (Rievaux p. 74).

When Castiglione was in his mid 30's, under the Yongzheng emperor, he received an imperial commission to paint *One Hundred Horses*. The year was 1723. Done on a large silk hand scroll, over 26 feet in length, it took Castiglione five years to complete and is considered his greatest work. Yongzheng rejected the first sketch, insisting that Castiglione put clothes on the men, whom Castiglione had

envisioned in their more European Baroque bareness, or perhaps as he had actually seen them. After the Yongzheng emperor died, in late 1735, *One Hundred Horses*, with the riders now clad, was presented to the newly enthroned Qianlong emperor and declared a masterpiece. Shortly thereafter, Castiglione was named the Emperor's principal court painter.

Another scroll which Castiglione at least initiated is *Portraits of emperor Qianlong, the Empress and eleven Imperial Consorts*. "For a friend is the sharer of your soul, to your friend's spirit you join and attach your own, and you so mingle the two that you would like for your two spirits to become one" (Rievaux, quoting Ambrose, p. 58).

Painted right to left, over the 34 year reign of the Qianlong emperor, the images are tender and peaceful. Proud of his consorts and his reign, the emperor called it: *Mind Picture of a Well Governed and Tranquil Reign*. From the seals on the scroll we know that in his old age, after stepping down from the throne, Qianlong would open this scroll and meditate on his life and his concubines. Castiglione captures a serenity that affirms the heart and mind of the emperor, from the faces of his beloved to nature and wildlife and, in this way, he lifts the gaze of the observer, the emperor, to the divine through love.

LADY HOJA: THE FRAGRANT CONCUBINE

One concubine in particular seems to have captured the heart of the Qianlong emperor and the brushes of Castiglione and those who painted around him. She was Rong Fei, the Fragrant Concubine, or Lady Hoja, Huojuo shu. At least four images were made, so called "commissioned visages," *maitaigong*, with Lady Hoja's exotic attributes and similar accessories (Sotheby's, 1952). The painting shown here, attributed to Castiglione, dates from 1722, the year before the Qianlong emperor came to power, when she first came to the court and was given the name Rong Fei (Millward, 1994). To preserve a scent, which the emperor found irresistible, she bathed each day in camel milk, while making her way across China, to the Palace in Beijing. From his days

inside the palace walls, Castiglione would surely have heard, how Lady Hoja desperately longed for her home among the Uyghur people. The emperor gave her a garden, and it is said he even built a mosque, a small oasis, and a bazaar, just outside her window. Asked what more she longed for, she replied that she longed to die, and until that day came, in 1766, Rong Fei remained the emperor's favorite.

CREATING MEMORY

How and what we remember, and what we call to mind at some later point, was of great importance, especially to the Emperor. A hundred years before Castiglione, perhaps inspired by the

of the instruments and voices nearly lifts from the silk.

Castiglione is able to move the emperor, or any viewer, in and out of the scene by various levels of detail. In an image from the New Year's festival, painted in 1738, where his technique is more in European perspective, we engage in an idyllic world of adults at leisure, children playing with the snowflakes that melt on their fingertips and cling to the trees (Victoria Museum, ymy3010). Castiglione is masterful at capturing the joy of the moment, in a way that enables the emperor to recall, with the cast of his gaze, his many blessings: the children playing, the women gracing with their presence, the purity of the gleaming snow.



Giuseppe Castiglione | *A Victory Banquet Given by the Emperor for the Distinguished Officers and Soldiers of the Rebellion of Huibu* (1758-1759) | Wikimedia.

Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, Matteo Ricci had created in China a complex method for preserving memory, a Memory Palace, as he called it, where one could call to mind, alone, or better yet, with a friend, memories of the past, with some possible modifications, as the gift of one's imagination. This was essentially what Castiglione also did in his paintings of hunts, feasts and other celebrations. He recreates in animated detail the experience so that the smoke from grilled meats and the sound

The Qianlong emperor so enjoyed hunting, both in visual images and in experience, that he had the scene recreated, complete with yurts, at both the Yuanminguan and at the Chengde summer palaces. In 1754 the Emperor gave a feast to welcome the Toro Mongols, who came in search of his protection. We know from records at the Palace Museum that the feast was held in The Garden of Ten Thousand Trees, Wanshu, at the Chengde palace. Castiglione captures the

pride of the emperor, clad in lapis blue, seated cross-legged in his sedan chair, entrusted to red-dressed eunuchs who bear him to court. Around him Castiglione depicts the Manchu princes, Mongols and other officials kneeling to honour the emperor upon his arrival.



One or Two. Double portrait of the Qianlong emperor.

GRATITUDE FOR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

For Castiglione's 70th birthday, the emperor gave a grand party. "Festivities were held in the palace of Yuanmingyuan. The gifts given by the Emperor to Castiglione '... were six pieces of silk of rare quality, a mandarin's robe and a large agate necklace.'" A grand procession with musicians, mandarins and soldiers "made a great deal of noise" and the well-planned ceremony went off without a hitch (McDowall, 2015).

Late in life, the Emperor comes to see himself as a co-creator, placing himself literally inside the image in a self-portrait that he paints with the help of Castiglione. It is a snowy winter day; the Emperor enjoys the warmth of his heated kang bed inside his study. The white paper becomes the snow against a darkish wash of ink. The year is 1763 and the Qianlong Emperor writes in his own brush, but because of his lack of confidence, he has asked Castiglione to paint the figures for him. The painting demonstrates the emperor's excellence as a painter, and yet he humbles himself with this deferral to Castiglione,

a movement of both artistic and spiritual growth, from the gift of their mature spiritual friendship (Palace Museum, Gu237286).

DUAL NATURES RECURSION AND DOUBLE PORTRAITS

Perhaps no painting is more affirmative of the spiritual reflection that Castiglione inspired, particularly in the Qianlong emperor, than his double portraits, *One or Two?* (Zito, 1997, pp. 39-43; Lachman 1996, pp. 736-744; Kleutghen, 2012, pp. 25-46; Rawski and Rawson 2005, p. 283). Castiglione inspired and supervised work on at least two of the four of these recession paintings, on silk, where the Qianlong emperor appears in a painting of himself which hangs in his study where he is portrayed working and reflecting. The sacred nature of the moment is enhanced in one, where the emperor's eyes focus on his attendant, pouring water from a ritual vessel, surrounded with other symbolic attributes, for example, an ancient bronze measuring tool and a blue and white porcelain water vessel which can be dated to the early 15th century (Truong). These symbolise the Emperor's personification of that which is sacred as well as his ultimate authority.

These can be interpreted both as a Buddhist reflection (Kleutghen, 2012. pp.25-46) and as a Christian interpretation of the "two natures" of God and man. Castiglione would have been aware of the importance of the dual nature, human and divine, in relation to the emperor, as this was discussed also by the Jesuit Diego de Pantoja who served in Imperial China together with the first Jesuits in Beijing (I. Ramos, personal communication 9 Feb, 2019). Pantoja writes about the relationship of the dual nature of Christ in relation to Buddhism and in his *Seven Victories*, in the context of pride (Pantoja, in Ye Nong, ed, pp. 8-9, 19; Ramos (2018). These can both be affirmed by what the Emperor writes with his own brush: "One or two? My two faces never come together yet are never separate. One can be Confucian, one can be Mohist. Why should I worry or even think?" (Wu, 1996, p. 235). The philosophy of Mohism was related to care or Caritas or in some contexts universal love and

good governance.

CONCLUSION

Castiglione creates with his brush, the visual imagery to raise the deeper existential questions from the depths of imperial interiority. As if in a mirror, his paintings give perspective to the lives and dealings of three emperors who sought not only to expand their geographical realm, but also to find intellectual and aesthetic affirmation for their aspirations. What these three emperors might have received as a spiritual gift in return, through the presence of Castiglione and his Jesuit companions is a broader understanding of the universality of the human condition: gratitude for the simple joys of life, granted to us by God, as well as a fear of death, loss and rejection, which only God can redress.



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